



● **DEBUT DAY:** Philip Gray in his first appearance in a Luton Town shirt. The striker, signed from Spurs for £275,000 48 hours earlier, went on as a late sub for Sean Farrell and this was a half-chance that got away after he had nipped in on the goal side of former White Hart Lane colleague Mitchell Thomas.

TEAMWORK IS REPLY TO THE RELEGATION

BOTH MANAGERS agreed at Upton Park on Saturday that the opening day draw between Luton Town and West Ham was a fair result.

They both knew either team might have nicked the points after a see-saw 90 minutes in which each had periods of ascendancy.

My pleasure from watching the first match in what David Pleat says will be a season of fear for many First Division managers was that the Town performed far better than they had done in any of the pre-season outings.

Misguided predictions?

And they also played well enough to suggest that the annual predictions of Luton for relegation could be more misguided than usual. The bookies make the Town 250-1 for the title, the longest odds of any club, which means they back them for bottom place in a crucial season which could be the last before the Premier League kicks off.

Spirit and determination

The Town boss has admitted that the current first team squad is not good enough or big enough to do exceptionally well. But he added that it had the spirit and determination to more than just survive in the top flight.

Saturday's display went a long way to proving his point, and cheered up a big Town following as they saw a team prepared to sweat in the sun.

Defiance

It is a little unkind on the rest of the team to pick out Alec Chamberlain and Mark Pembroke as the star men. But they as much as anyone typified the defiance needed against a newly-promoted team desperate to impress the 25,000 crowd.

Chamberlain had to be superb in the first

half, and his decision-making on when to catch and when to punch was almost faultless, despite the buffeting he received from the muscular twin assaults launched by Mick Small and Leroy Rosenior.

Pembroke was close to being a match-winner as well as the point-saver. A second-half drive rattled the bar and an injury-time clearance off the line at the other end denied Small a debut winner.

There were times when the Town lived a little dangerously as West Ham had the lion's share of possession in the first half.

But there was a welcome resilience in a team where every man was prepared to be a defender in his area of responsibility.

Different

I find Mr. Pleat a different man from the manager of a decade ago, and he went to Upton Park with a more cautious approach than was usual in the days when he had men like David Moss, Bob Hatton, Kirk Stephens and the young Brian Stein.

It was not, he said before the game, the away team's duty to entertain the fans at the

price of being beaten. But his team of the 90s certainly started off entertaining the Town following.

John Dreyer and Graham Rodger withstood everything thrown at them as West Ham tried a surprisingly large number of long-ball attacks.

Physical

The central defenders dealt with the aerial danger and the physical challenges pretty well. Stuart Slater and Martin Allen were threats on the flanks, but David Beaumont and Richard Harvey coped with a few scares, and when they were put under pressure other players dug in to help out.

David Preece was the best midfield distributor on view, and Darron McDonough had one of the best games I have seen him play as the midfield anchor man.

Balance

He was also involved, with a clever headed pass, in one of the Town's best second-half attacks after they had withstood a lot of pressure before the break.

Pembroke on the right and Kingsley

Black on the left were good balance between defence and attack, and Brian Stein was always deeper than the usual centre-forward.

Sean Farrell, still seeking full match fitness, twice exposed West Ham defence that looked ponderous when the Town attacked on the break. Tim Breacker was pitched as a makeshift centre-half because of injuries to the Hammers' squad, and would have had a real nightmare if Farrell had been able to finish as well as he usually does.

On edge

At half-time I was on edge because the Town had been forced to spend most of the first half defending. Even left back Mitchell Thomas got upfield to try his luck.

My fear was that the very efficient rearguard action could so easily be wrecked by an unlucky bounce or something as common as a dodgy decision by the referee.

On the other side of the coin I spoke to a West Ham fan during the interval who was on tenterhooks: "Luton haven't had a

Pictures: Josh Levy

shot... that looks ominous."

Tackle

Small and Rosenior, both making their debuts, were short of the power and accuracy needed to capitalise on half-chances. Rosenior should have put away a couple, but first he was denied by a brilliant tackle by Dreyer, and then by Harvey's clearance off the line. Allen volleyed the last first-half chance over the bar.

When the half-time whistle blew we had not seen a single Town shot of substance.

But that was put right after the interval. The home side's frustration grew as the Town defence showed no sign of wilting, and the Hammers were given a reminder of the narrow difference between success and failure when Pembroke's 51st-minute drive from 30 yards beat Ludek Miklosko but came back off the bar.

Four minutes later Stein made a decisive midfield intervention and threaded a pass through for Farrell to beat down on goal in the inside left position.

Nearly

It ought to have been 1-0 to the Town, but Farrell's shot lacked power and the keeper saved.

Small's back-header was only a few inches wide of embarrassing Chamberlain at the other end before Farrell

was given another clear run at goal.

This time Preece paved the way with a searching cross-field ball from left to right. McDonough was in space to meet it and head a pass through a gap. Once more Farrell did well to race through, but again he could not find the bite in the shot, and West Ham survived another close call.

With 19 minutes to go new signing Phil Gray was sent on in place of Farrell, but had few chances to demonstrate his ability.

He had a glimmer of an opportunity which was lost when he was wrong-footed, but the Town were forced to withdraw and defend again as West Ham pounded away in the closing stages.

There was a touch of desperation about some of their attacking, dealt with capably by a Town team in which every man was willing to help.

Smiling

George Parris wasted a chance with a wild drive over the bar after Chamberlain had been

baulked at a corner, and in injury time another corner almost delivered the blow that might have wrecked the Town's confidence, but Pembroke was in the right place to hack away Small's header.

At the end Town faces were smiling through the sweat. They had every right to be pleased with their efforts.

Match details

West Ham Utd 0 Luton Town 0

TOWN: Chamberlain; Beaumont, Rodger, Dreyer, Harvey; Pembroke, McDonough, Preece, Black; Stein, Farrell (Gray, 71 mins).

HAMMERS: Miklosko; Brown, Foster, Breacker, Thomas; Allen, Parris, Bishop (Keen, 71 mins); Slater, Small, Rosenior.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town four saved, five wide and one hit the bar; Hammers nine saved and seven wide. Corners: 8-1 to West Ham.

BOOKED: Mark Pembroke for dissent, pointing out correctly that the ref was ordering a free kick to be taken from the wrong place; Tim Breacker for a foul on Brian Stein.

REFEREE: Martin Bodenham, Cornwall. I didn't agree with every decision, but he was strictly impartial.

ATTENDANCE: 25,079, including about a thousand from Luton.

ENTERTAINMENT: Town fans probably enjoyed it more than the frustrated home supporters. Nice to see the Town very definitely not a soft touch.

Town match verdict ★★★★★

A DEFIANT ODDS ON A CAMPAIGN



● **BATTLING:** Kingsley Black shows determination typical of the whole Town team.



● **CLOSE CALL:** Sean Farrell gets through to fire in a shot which might have put the Town ahead early in the second half. But the drive was too near the keeper to put the perfect touch to a swift Town break.

Club gambling on the SuperLeague

LUTON TOWN HAVE backed their belief in themselves by joining the rest of the First Division in giving notice that they intend to resign from the Football League.

The 22 clubs put up a united front. But the three who are relegated at the end of this season could pay dearly. Every club is gambling on its ability to stay up to qualify for the new Premier League, to be run by the FA.

Football is split by the 'SuperLeague' concept. Few doubt that its major effect will be to ensure that

the rich get richer.

Opponents argue that it will also ensure the poor get poorer, and that the big clubs have a duty to share the wealth they generate with the smaller ones.

The Town faced a ticklish problem: they want to be in the Premier League if it happens. But there is also a feeling that it might not be good for the game as a whole. And they remember that they were once in the Fourth Division.

In the 'SuperLeague' debate they could not afford to buck the First Division trend. They would be foolhardy to rule themselves out, knowing that any

club that can get into the Premier League next season through its playing ability this season will not be denied its place.

But relegated teams, as the Premier League gets progressively smaller in the next year or two, might have insurmountable problems trying to get back. Stadium facilities and capacities could be included in the requirement.

David Pleat's view is that every First Division club had to join the rest, however reluctantly, to safeguard their interests.

Town General Manager Bill Tomlins knows that teams not in the Premier Division will be at a disadvantage when commercial decisions are taken, particularly TV rights.

He said: "If you are a major cause of generating funds you should receive your fair share of that money. That's what I want for Luton Town."

He believes the change will not be a total breakaway. He said: "The Premier League is the way the present First Division clubs can control their own destiny. It will be democratic, one club one vote, with a three-quarter majority likely before decisions can be implemented."

Greater fear of failure

"This season the First Division will have three down and three up, so three of the 22 who have voted for the change will be out."

He anticipates that the Premier League will settle down at 22 teams, and the Town's vote will be against any suggestion that qualification should be only about ground size, club finances or stadium facilities.

"It should be down to what happens in 90 minutes on Saturday afternoons," he said.

Mr. Pleat believes the prospect — some think the threat — of the Premier League will colour a lot of the thinking by First Division managers this season.

"There will be a greater fear of failure this time," he said. "About half the First Division clubs will be worried."

"And all of us at Luton Town know how vital it is that come the end of the season we must still be in the First Division. It is now more important than ever."



● **FLOORED:** Kingsley Black downed by a double tackle.



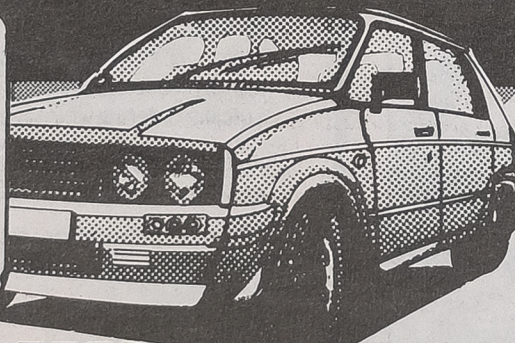
● **HANDED OFF:** Brian Stein is a yard short of beating goalkeeper Ludo Miklosko to the ball, with Tim Breacker, a makeshift centre-half on Saturday, shadowing his old mate. Breacker was later booked for a mis-timed tackle on the striker.

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